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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT'S ABSENTEE MP PROBLEM

REF: A. KABUL 2175  
[1](#)B. KABUL 1193

[1](#)1. (SBU) Afghanistan's Wolesi Jirga (Lower House of the National Assembly) has failed to make quorum on more than half of its business days since its new legislative session began July 22. Moreover, members lose quorum before they finish the day's business on many other occasions. The poor attendance record consistently leaves the National Assembly unable to resolve conflicts and vote on legislation, stalling progress on important issues ranging from the elections law to funding the country's higher education system. Recent attempts by the Lower House's staff to shame members into reporting for work may have had some effect -- one day after the names of 21 chronically absent MPs appeared in the media, a nearly full house gathered for a mundane discussion of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS).

[1](#)2. (SBU) After passing two bills in its opening week in late July, the Lower House has not been able to hold votes on any bill and is only occasionally able to muster the attendance necessary for non-binding resolutions in the current session. In the meantime, without the ability to vote on and settle issues, minor disputes drag on long after exhausting productive debate (ref A). Committees, too, have had trouble with absenteeism, making it difficult to resolve disputes over legislation before the subject is brought up on the house floor. As seen with last session's walkout by non-Pashtun MPs over a Kuchi Pashtun's ethno-nationalist remarks (ref B), MPs will also break quorum to antagonize their opponents or block unfavorable measures from reaching a vote. The Upper House, which is less powerful and mainly ratifies decisions made in the Lower House, also has difficulty making quorum on most days. Members of both houses include several former warlords, who others say lack the interest to attend sessions regularly and actively participate in the day-to-day business of legislating.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Parliament staff working closely with Lower House Speaker Yunus Qanooni began naming absent MPs this week in an effort to shame them in to showing up. Staff reported more than 60 MPs had regularly missed sessions throughout August, while others make only cursory morning visits as the Lower House begins one of its three weekly sessions, then return home before lunch. Still other MPs are nowhere to be found -- some suspected of requesting asylum in Europe, some likely on lengthy summer vacations. However, Qanooni's efforts are

couched in political strategy. Among the 21 names he released this week is Abdul Qaum Karzai, brother of President Karzai, while many major players in Qanooni's opposition United Front coalition escaped the public exposure despite equally poor attendance. In any case, the effort produced a short-term victory as powerbrokers Burhanuddin Rabbani (Jamiat party leader and a former president) and Ustad Rasoul Sayyaf (a former Northern Alliance warlord) joined other long-absent MPs for Wednesday's ANDS discussion, an encouraging display of responsiveness to potentially negative media coverage.

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